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PROSPECT OF COMMUNIST EXPLOITATION
OF THE POLITICAL CRISIS IN BURMA

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I. Introduction

The struggle for power in Burma between the factions of the ruling AFPFL coalition may be lost by either of the rivals, but there will be only one real winner, the Communists. Prime Minister U Nu's narrow victory over the Kyaw Nyein-Ba Swe group in the June 9 vote in the Chamber of Deputies was made possible only by the votes of the 42 deputies of the National United Front (NUF), the Communist-dominated opposition front. It is hardly to be believed that this Communist support would have been given unless the NUF expected to benefit in some way from a Nu victory. It is true that Nu has denied making any deal with the NUF and has announced his intention of "disowning" NUF support in future elections, but he may discover, as have other non-Communist political leaders who have attempted to "use" Communist support for their own purposes, that it is easier to get into an alliance with the Communists than it is to get out of it again.

One of the most disturbing things about the present course of events in Burma is the extent to which they seem to be following a pattern which we have already seen in other Southeast Asian countries in which Communism has made significant gains. In Indonesia, President Sukarno has relied upon Communist support to maintain his position against increasing opposition from other non-Communist elements. He has thus further estranged himself from these non-Communist groups and finds himself increasingly dependent upon Communist support and upon the pro-Communist advisers who surround him. In alliance with the popular Sukarno, the Communist Party of Indonesia has won great support among the Indonesian people and a Communist electoral victory in Indonesia in the not too distant future is, as it stands now, not inconceivable. It is a cause of real concern for the future of Burma that U Nu, as a consequence of his rivalry with other non-Communist leaders, should be turning in the same direction that Sukarno did and exposing himself and Burma to the same dangers.

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II. Background of the Political Crisis in Burma

The Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) which took power in Burma as the successor to the British, was composed, after the expulsion of the Communists in 1947, of the Burma Socialist Party (BSP) and a group of non-party "independents" among whom U Nu was the principal figure. U Nu served as prime minister of the coalition government, but the BSP filled most of the cabinet posts. This coalition has governed Burma since independence and has not faced serious opposition at the polls. It won the general elections in 1951 and 1956 by substantial majorities. A combination of BSP organization, Nu's wide popularity in the country and the absence of an effective opposition until recently have contributed to the AFPFL political dominance.

Strains developed within the coalition, due partly to personal rivalries and partly to BSP resentment of Nu's free-wheeling methods which often ignored party and government channels, particularly in the conduct of foreign policy. Nu also sometimes adopted a more sympathetic attitude towards the Communist bloc than was agreeable, at least to the more conservative faction of the BSP led by Kyaw Nyein.

The strains were kept under control due to the need to present a front of AFPFL unity to the country and to the BSP need for the support of Nu's popularity and Nu's need for the services of BSP ministers in the cabinet. However, following the election of April 1956 the struggle came into the open. Under BSP pressure Nu resigned the premiership and was succeeded by Socialist U Ba Swe, although it was generally felt that Kyaw Nyein was principally responsible for forcing the issue. At least Nu's resentment was chiefly focused on Kyaw Nyein.

On stepping down, Nu agreed to return to office in one year "if he was needed". He seems immediately to have begun preparations for a return to power. In March 1957, Nu made his bid for a return to office. The BSP did not feel ready for a test of strength and acquiesced. An important factor in the BSP's acquiescence

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was the fear that Nu might turn to the legal opposition National Unity Front (NUF), a Communist-dominated coalition which in the 1956 elections had won some 50 seats in the Chamber of Deputies. The leftist alliance might have threatened AFPFL control of the government, and the BSP, for the time being at any rate, elected to place AFPFL unity above its desire to keep Nu out of office.

This uneasy coalition, however, could not last. In early 1958 the struggle broke into the open again over the secretaryship of the AFPFL, currently held by Kyaw Dun, a Nu adherent. Unable or unwilling to reconcile differences, the two factions agreed to a showdown. The issue was twofold: Which faction was to continue under the AFPFL name and control the assets of the coalition, presumably including the mass organizations of peasants and labor? And which was to continue in control of the government?

The issue might have been decided in the Supreme Council of the AFPFL itself, but for a variety of reasons, both parties agreed to put it to the test in the Chamber of Deputies on the basis of a no-confidence motion against Nu's government. The motion was tabled by Ba Swe on 5 June and the vote taken on 9 June. U Nu won a precarious victory by a vote, according to press reports, of 127 to 119. This narrow majority included, presumably, the 42 votes of the NUF, the 6 votes of the Arakan National Union Organization led by U Kyaw Min who has been rewarded with the Finance Ministry in Nu's new cabinet, and a majority of the votes of the minority groups. Apparently, then, within the AFPFL organization itself, as distinct from the governmental structure, Kyaw Nyein and Ba Swe had a majority.

III. Possible Future Developments

Whether Nu elects to attempt to govern with the present Parliament and a majority of a few votes or to dissolve Parliament and hold new elections, he is likely to find himself dependent, to a greater or lesser degree, upon the continued support of the NUF. It is true that the new cabinet includes no members

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of the NUF. Nevertheless, whether in the government or not, the solid NUF bloc in the Chamber will still be in a position to exercise a decisive influence upon the policies of the government.

In a new election, an alliance between the NUF and U Nu would almost certainly win a decisive victory. The personal popularity of U Nu throughout the country has always been one of the principal assets of the AFPFL and it will not be forgotten that in 1956 the NUF, even though then opposed by Nu, succeeded in winning almost 40 percent of the total popular vote although it entered candidates in only approximately half of the total number of election districts.

Nu has already disclaimed any intention of making such an electoral alliance, but his victory in Parliament with NUF support has undoubtedly identified him sufficiently with the NUF in the popular mind that the NUF will be able to capitalize on his popularity even in the absence of a formal alliance. The result might well be three more or less evenly balanced groups in a new Parliament-- the NUF, the Nu faction, and the Kyaw Nyein faction. In this event, Nu would be even more dependent upon the support of the NUF if he wished to continue as head of a new government. Neither he nor the NUF might, in these circumstances, feel still bound by earlier commitments that no NUF members were to be included in the cabinet.

IV. The Nature of a Nu/NUF Government

The Cabinet

As noted above, the cabinet formed by U Nu immediately following his parliamentary victory over Kyaw Nyein does not include any NUF members. After an election in which the NUF had made significant gains Nu might find it impossible to avoid taking them into the government. Even if he did not care to take the risk of an unfavorable public reaction by including members of the Burma Workers (Communist) Party which leads the NUF, there are pro-Communist splinter parties in the NUF whose opportunistic leaders

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such as Aung Than could be appointed. Thein Pe Myint, Communist intellectual, would also be available, as would left-wing Socialists such as Thakin Tin (now in the cabinet) and former Socialists such as Bo Letya who has maintained contact with the insurgent BCP. A pro-Communist cabinet might thus be created which would serve the purposes of the NUF without including any avowed Communists. This is much the way in which the Indonesian Communist Party has worked to establish its influence in the government and around Sukarno without, as yet, seeking actual participation in the government by Party members.

The Mass Organizations Under a Nu/NUF Coalition

Much of the AFPFL strength has been derived from its mass organizations, particularly the All-Burma Peasant Organization (ABPO) and the Trade Union Congress (Burma) (TUC (B)). These organizations have benefited greatly from the fact that they have enjoyed government support. Government loans to peasants, for instance, have been channeled through the ABPO, providing a strong inducement to peasants to be members in good standing. Should the control of such patronage plums pass into the hands of a pro-Communist government, the anti-Communist orientation of the ABPO and the TUC (B) might suffer a rapid change. Several member unions of the Ba Swe-controlled TUC (B) have already defected to U Nu's group. The approaches of the Communist-controlled peasant and labor organizations looking towards workers unity and merger would probably receive a more sympathetic hearing than in the past. It will not be forgotten that control of mass organizations has been a major source of strength to the PKI.

The Armed Forces Under a Nu/NUF Coalition

The PKI benefited by its infiltration of the Indonesian armed forces, which was largely effected while pro-Communist Iwa Kusumamantri occupied the Ministry of Defense. It is not difficult to foresee a similar process taking place in Burma. With a leftist or pro-Communist replacing U Ba Swe as Minister of Defense, a weeding out of anti-Communist officers could be begun. Communist

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sympathizer General Kyaw Zaw might even be brought back from his enforced retirement to succeed Ne Win as Commander-in-Chief.

The Burmese Armed Forces, like the police, have so far remained aloof from the crisis, although their sympathies are probably with Kyaw Nyein and Ba Swe. Whether they would, or could, take action in any situation short of an open Communist takeover is questionable, although this might be the last resort of the anti-Communist faction after political defeat. General Ne Win and the Burma Army might find themselves in the same sort of dilemma as that facing anti-Communist General Nasution of Indonesia.

Policy of a Nu/NUF Government

The NUF has not, in the last year or two, taken sharp issue with the general outlines of Government of the Union of Burma (GUB) policies. In the domestic field, NUF fire has been concentrated upon the GUB refusal to deal with the Communist insurgents and its continued military effort to stamp out the insurrection. In foreign relations, the NUF has in general approved the neutralist policies of the GUB, although voicing strong opposition on occasions when the GUB has diverged from the Communist line such as the Burmese protest against Soviet actions in Hungary. The NUF has also opposed GUB statements and measures against subversive activities of the Communist bloc in Burma.

A Nu-NUF government, dependent upon NUF votes to remain in power, would almost inevitably be driven closer to the NUF position on all these issues. It is most unlikely, for instance, that the Burmese protest and U.N. vote on the Hungarian question would have taken place if such a leftist coalition had been in power. GUB measures against illegal Chinese immigration, against subversive activities of the Bank of China, etc., could scarcely have been undertaken by such a government.

As for the vital domestic issue of negotiation with the insurgents and legalization of the BCP, it would not be reasonable to expect a government, including NUF elements who have always

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strongly advocated a settlement on BCP terms, to maintain the firm opposition to such a deal which has characterized the present GUB. It would probably be inevitable that such a government would enter on the path of negotiation and compromise with Communist insurgents which the Royal Laotian Government has already followed with such disturbing results.

Not only would a Nu-NUF coalition be pressured in this direction by its NUF elements, but there is some reason to believe that Nu himself has a softer attitude on these issues than the present GUB where Kyaw Nyein's influence is present. Most of the initiative in the barter trade deals with the Communist bloc came from Nu. He has professed himself greatly impressed by the progress made in the Soviet Union and in Red China. He has sometimes expressed a desire to work with rather than against the legal leftist opposition. There have been rumors of his carrying on negotiations with the BCP behind the backs of his cabinet. He was chiefly responsible for permitting the NUF to send delegates to the Afro-Asian Solidarity Conference at Cairo. With such a background it is not likely that he would have the capacity to resist the pressure of the NUF on these questions.

V. The Indonesian Parallel

There are many similarities between the political role of U Nu and that of Sukarno under whose leadership Indonesia has drifted so far toward Communist domination. Both carry the prestige of winning independence for their countries. Both find the basis of their political power in the wide popularity which they enjoy among their people, rather than in party organization. Both enjoy large political gestures and dramatic speeches and dislike the day-to-day drudgery of government. Both have received the red carpet treatment on visits to the Soviet Union and to Red China and have as a result acquired an inflated estimate of themselves as world statesmen. Both have personal ties with Communist leaders growing out of old associations in the struggle for independence. Both are to some degree political opportunists, determined to stay in power and likely to seek help from almost any source if necessary to that end.

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It would not be at all surprising if Nu, in a political situation comparable to that in which Sukarno has found himself, should follow the same course and find himself the captive of the leftwing support upon which he would increasingly have to rely.

The Burma Communists in many respects stand where the PKI stood some years ago. The armed struggle having failed, they are turning to legal action through a legal Party organization already in existence. They are attempting to carry out political infiltration and seeking to establish a united front with non-Communist elements as a stage on their road to power. They would like to be able to exploit the popularity of U Nu as the PKI has exploited Sukarno's. In alliance with U Nu they would be in a position to carry out the infiltration and control of the mass organizations and of the armed forces which have played so important a part in the success of the PKI. In a united front with Nu's independents and some elements of the BSP, the BWP/NUF could expect to reap some of the same benefits which the PKI has achieved through its coalition with the Partai Nasionalis Indonesia (PNI).

While such parallels can be pushed too far and there are many points of difference between Burma and Indonesia which are not catalogued here, nevertheless, the common factors between Burma in the present crisis and Indonesia at the beginning of the rise of the PKI, are sufficient to justify concern whether Burma may not be about to enter upon the same unhappy path.

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